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| **Your article** |
| **The Harlem Renaissance** |
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| The Harlem Renaissance was a flourishing of artistic, intellectual, musical and literary accomplishments by African Americans between the World Wars. The movement took its name from Harlem, a neighbourhood on the northern section of Manhattan Island. Harlem became the de-facto centre of the African American community in New York City, and many of the most important figures of the Renaissance called it home. During the Renaissance, intellectuals published ground-breaking work that explored philosophical questions and political possibilities for African Americans that would be explored throughout the twentieth century. |
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Philosopher Alain Locke’s influential book *The New Negro*, published in 1925, promoted outspoken advocacy for social rights and a refusal to submit quietly to discrimination; the book was the impetus behind the ‘New Negro Movement’, which would eventually come to be called ‘The Harlem Renaissance.’ One of the recurrent themes defining the Harlem Renaissance was the exploration of African culture. Black artists and thinkers were greatly inspired by Locke’s belief that African Americans should look to ancient Egyptian or sub-Saharan African traditions for inspiration; others chose to engage with ideas current in European and American Modernism.  A number of black artists came to prominence in this period. Visual artists included Aaron Douglas, Palmer Hayden, Meta Warrick Fuller, William H. Johnson, Jacob Lawrence, Archibald Motley, Jr. and Augusta Savage. Writers Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen and Claude McKay all gave a literary voice to the experiences of African Americans in Harlem and around the country. Jazz music also came to national and international prominence with performers likes‘Count’ Basie,Duke Ellington and Billie Holiday gaining mainstream audiences and performing at the Cotton Club, then a ‘Whites-only’ establishment. The Great Migration was a significant catalyst for the Harlem Renaissance. It is estimated that between 1910 and 1945 over a million African Americans left the South in search of a better life in Northern cities like New York, Chicago and Detroit. The Southern United States, which had a predominantly agrarian economy for centuries, had virtually failed to ‘reconstruct’ after the Civil War. For blacks suffering under the socially entrenched racism common to the region, living conditions and employment options were often horrendous. At the same time Northern cities were growing; the industrial economy created jobs and the housing market was booming. For many blacks the North was seen as a ‘Promised Land’ where they could build a better life. This period also saw the beginning of several important precursors of the civil rights movement including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League.  File: Harlem\_mecca.jpg  Figure 1. Cover of ‘Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro’, the March 1925 issue of Survey Graphic.  Source: Courtesy of the Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia.  File: Archibald\_blues.jpg  Figure 2. Archibald J. Motley Jr Blues, 1929. Oil on canvas. 31 1/2 x 39 1/2 inches (80 x 100.3 cm). Collection Valerie Gerrard Browne, Chicago  Source: © Valerie Gerrard Browne (the artist’s daughter-in-law)  It was *Shuffle Along*, according to Langston Hughes, that gave a scintillating send-off’ to the movement so often described as a Harlem Renaissance which would ‘spread to books, African sculpture, music, and dancing’ (*The Big Sea*, 223, 224). This musical, Hughes suggests, provided ‘just the proper push […] to that Negro vogue of the 20’s’ (224) associated with contemporary icons such as jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong, *Shuffle Along* chorus member Josephine Baker, and James P. Johnson, composer of the musical accompaniment for the wildly popular dance, ‘The Charleston’.  Literary figures and public intellectuals soon addressed the major issues concerning the music of and around the Harlem Renaissance. The most notable of these, perhaps, was Hughes, whose poetry consistently demonstrated jazz and blues influences. Often, music served as the primary focus for Hughes in poems like ‘Nude Young Dancer’ (‘What jungle tree have you slept under, / Midnight dancer of the jazzy hour?’) and ‘Jazzonia’ (‘In a Harlem cabaret / Six long-headed jazzers play’), both of which are featured in Alain Locke’s famous collection, *The New Negro* (227, 226). As an essayist, Hughes directly attributes musical innovation in the Harlem Renaissance to race and class, writing in ‘The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain’ that the ‘common element’—those African Americans from the lower economic classes—‘are not afraid of spirituals’ and can truly claim ‘jazz is their child’ (1312); ‘the Negro artist’, Hughes argues, makes use of ‘his racial individuality’ to create forms like ‘the Blues’ (1312). In opposition, George S. Schuyler posits in ‘The Negro-Art Hokum’, which appeared in the same magazine (*The Nation*) a week before Hughes’s essay, that Hughes’s belief in ‘racial individuality’ effectively promotes a bigoted understanding of black Americans as fundamentally ‘peculiar’. While Schuyler does concede that spirituals, the blues, and jazz have indeed come ‘from dark-skinned sources’ (1221), he insists that these forms are much more accurately attributed to class and region. As a final point of contention, Schuyler notes that even ‘whites have assisted’ in jazz’s ‘development’, which, along with ‘the literature, painting, and sculpture of Aframericans’, exhibits clear ‘European influence’ (1221).  Even with its origins and development a matter of debate, music like jazz irrefutably played a major role in the creative literature of the Harlem Renaissance, serving often as a general backdrop and other times as an explicit focus. Gwendolyn Bennett, for example, explores how music is a unique expression of African American identity in ‘Song’, a poem featured in *The New Negro* that rhythmically and lyrically demonstrates how jazz can ‘sing the heart of a race’ by conveying joy and grief simultaneously (225). By using the image of a ‘Breaking heart / To the time of laughter’, Bennett illustrates how the combination of joyful melodies and sorrowful contemplation of the past creates an art form with the unique ability to express a cultural identity forged from the clash of rich heritage and a history of racial discrimination (225). In his essay ‘Jazz at Home’, J.A. Rogers describes the Jazz genre as ‘a spirit that can express itself in almost anything’ (*The New Negro,* 217), thus affirming its multiple roles in the literature of the time. While the music and dance of a cake walk might be scenery in a play like Zora Neale Hurston’s *Color Struck*, in the essay ‘How It Feels to Be Colored Me’ Hurston remarks on jazz’s power: ‘It constricts the thorax and splits the heart with its tempo and narcotic harmonies’ (1032); she is thrown into a sort of ‘primitive fury’, that causes her to ‘dance wildly inside [her]self … yell within … whoop’ (1032). She cannot emerge until the song is over. Rudolph Fisher extends the hypnotic power of jazz into the formal elements of a literary work via ‘The City of Refuge’, where a second-person passage winds the reader down sentence staircases and into a cabaret:  Supporting yourself against close walls, you crouchingly descend a narrow,  twisted staircase until, with a final turn, you find yourself in a glaring, long, low basement. In a moment your eyes become accustomed to the haze of tobacco smoke … you trace the slow-jazz accompaniment you heard as you came down the stairs to a pianist, a cornetist, and a drummer on a little platform at the far end of the room. There is a cleared space from the foot of the stairs, where you are standing, to the platform where this orchestra is mounted, and in it a tall brown girl is swaying from side to side and rhythmically proclaiming that she has the world in a jug and the stopper in her hand. (70-71)  Fisher, who sang ‘with Paul Robeson during their college days’ (Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 241), knew and incorporated the power of music into literature.  Like jazz, the spiritual is closely related to both music and literature; here, though, it is the literature which inspires the music. Arising from slave songs, poems, and religion, spirituals served as an alternative medium through which to lament oppression. In ‘The Negro Spirituals’, published in his own *The New Negro,* Alain Locke argues that spirituals are needed because poetry alone is not sufficiently effective in portraying moods (203); the musicality and vocalization of spirituals are vital, in Locke's opinion, to relaying the hardships of oppression. He asserts of spirituals that ‘their finest meaning resides in their musical elements’ (206), while in ‘Negro Art and America’, Albert C. Barnes depicts spirituals as ‘pure soul’ and ‘wild chants’ performed without the restraint or hesitation that might be found in other forms of literature such as poetry (23, 21).  To blend both literature and music, though, is perhaps (according to Houston Baker) the most modernist contribution of early 20th-century African American literature. In Baker’s *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, W.E.B. DuBois earns special praise for incorporating printed bars of music into *The Souls of Black Folk*, allowing his text to ‘sing’ (Baker, 67) and, in the process, to join the numerous ‘blues geographies’ that comprise the sounds of a boundary-less assemblage Baker calls ‘renaissancism’ (106). 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| Further reading:  (Baker)  (Barnes)  (Bennett)  (Fisher)  (Gates)  (Goeser)  (Hughes)  (Hughes, Jazzonia)  (Hughes, The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain)  (Hughes, Nude Young Dancer)  (Hurston)  (Hurston, How it Feels to Be Colored Me)  (Locke)  (Locke, The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance)  (Ogbar)  (Rogers)  (Schuyler)  (Thaggert) |